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School stress and burnout in adolescence

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Abstract

Adolescence is an important stage characterized by major physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes that occur in the transition from childhood to adulthood, with personality development, identity formation and search for social space. During this period, the adolescent is considered a person of greater vulnerability, given the numerous factors that can influence their daily lives. Among these factors, the excess of school activities can be highlighted as generating stress and emotional overload, leading to several consequences. This article presents some characteristics of the emotional development of adolescents and discusses the importance of stress in academic life and its potential to trigger burnout.

Keywords: Adolescent, stress, burnout, school difficulties

Introduction

Adolescence is an important stage characterized by major physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes that occur in the transition from childhood to adulthood. These modifications involve different domains of development such as identity formation, personal relationships within the family and with colleagues, determining a period of ambiguity and experimentation with social roles and values [2].

During the second decade of life, in addition to puberty and other physiological events, the growth and development of the central nervous system also occurs in adolescence, initially with predominance of the limbic system, evolving for a few years until the full development of the prefrontal cortex. This maturation of the brain makes it possible to understand the multiple characteristics of adolescents throughout this period, such as impetuosity, immediacy in decision-making in the face of different situations, a sense of invulnerability and the search for immediate rewards, which will be gradually replaced by greater capacity of understanding, reflection and ponderability until reaching the beginning of adult life [2]. Unlike what happens in childhood when a process of expansion of the central nervous system predominates, during adolescence the elimination of neural connections stands out, which will be completed during adult life [3]. Therefore, this entire process of neuro-emotional evolution is subject to various external influences, such as family relationships, social life, and school performance.

Among the various factors that can directly interfere with the physical and emotional development of adolescents, nutritional deficiencies, smoking, alcohol consumption, use of pharmacologically active illicit substances and stress, either as an isolated factor or, the most observed, associated with other factors [4]. Adolescents can be characterized as more vulnerable people, as stressful events experienced during this stage of development can compromise this neural maturation and contribute to the increase in psychiatric morbidities, such as anxiety and depression, often observed during adolescence [5].

Particularly stress, which although it is an innate defense of the body, should be highlighted as a factor that is becoming increasingly present and decisive in adolescence, with diverse etiologies and difficult to manage in this period of transformations. The causes of stress during the second decade of life can have multiple origins, such as the natural differences found within the family, the relative inability to understand the demands of their new social condition, the frustrations, fears, and anxiety that naturally make up the profile of adolescents [6].

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Burnout

Burnout is an individual response to prolonged stress conditions [7], first described in 1974 by psychologist Herbert Freudenberger [8] who characterized it as a condition of physical and mental exhaustion related to care activities and resulting from chronic exposure to stressors interpersonal skills in work activities [9]. As the topic gained more prominence and presented itself as a health problem, efforts were made to refine the definition of burnout, describing it as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion, caused by long-term involvement in situations of high emotional demand in daily activities. Such demands usually originate from the combination of very high expectations and chronic stress, emerging gradually, imperceptibly and with slow evolution [10].

Burnout syndrome was included in the International Classification of Diseases of the World Health Organization in 2019 and can be understood as encompassing three dimensions: i) emotional exhaustion (the feeling of excessive physical exertion and emotional fatigue caused by interaction with study or work colleagues, as an indication of exhaustion due to the load of activities and personal demands; ii) depersonalization (cynical attitudes and insensitive or impersonal responses towards people around them) and iii) low levels of personal fulfillment (loss of confidence in personal fulfillment and self-concept negative) [11].

Some conditions have been identified as being possible causes of burnout, namely [12]:

- 1. Overload of activities:** Excessive load when performing inappropriate activities or when emotions are required that are incompatible with the feelings of those who develop it.
- 2. Lack of control:** Related to inefficacy or reduced personal achievement, indicating that individuals do not have autonomy to solve their problems, or to make their choices.
- 3. Feeling of insufficient reward:** When individuals believe that they are not being properly rewarded for their performance, such as grades and grades on their resumes.
- 4. Absence of community:** When the sense of positive connection with other people in the scope of their activities is lost.
- 5. Lack of justice:** Mutual respect between people is fundamental to a sense of community; 6. Conflict of values: between the demands of the profession and the individual's own principles and values.

The consequences of burnout [13, 14] can be physical: i) a feeling of constant and progressive fatigue, sleep disorders, myalgia, headache, gastrointestinal disorders, immunodeficiency, cardiovascular disorders, respiratory system disorders, sexual dysfunctions and menstrual disorders), ii) emotional: lack of attention and concentration, memory changes, slowed thinking, feelings of alienation, loneliness, insufficiency, impatience, discouragement, depression and distrust and iii) behavioral: irritability, aggressiveness, inability to relax, difficulty accepting changes, loss of initiative, increased substance use, high-risk behavior, and increased likelihood of suicide.

School burnout

Schools are characterized by being socialization and development environments that play a role of great

importance in human development, since students spend a large part of their time in them and have as their main activity what can be compared to a job in which it is necessary to attend to a need. a series of requirements, that is, attendance at classes, completion of tasks, courses, and exams, obtaining diplomas and certifications. Although the demands associated with school requirements contribute to intellectual and socio-emotional development, they can also cause difficulties for some adolescents [15].

During the period of compulsory schooling, students may be subjected to stressful conditions

with the potential to cause loss of interest, performance, and commitment, raising doubts about their own ability to meet academic demands, since, in addition to basic academic skills, emotional well-being it is a fundamental condition for good performance in educational activities [16].

Academic performance is a multidimensional process that can be defined as the quantitative and qualitative assessment of skills acquired during the learning process. As it is a summative assessment, it can be considered as an event that causes stress among students [7].

School burnout is a condition characterized by feelings of exhaustion due to high academic demands, cynical behavior in relation to the value of school, detachment and feelings of ineffectiveness and incompetence in school activities [17]. It has important implications for the lives of adolescents given its potential to negatively affect academic performance, increasing the risk of dropping out of school [18, 19]. School stress is caused by intense learning activities in courses, excessive workloads, recurring assessments, and high personal expectations in search of satisfactory results. These challenges make students encounter difficulties that make the educational environment increasingly stressful [20, 21]. Still, the lack of social support and the inability to manage stress are elements associated with burnout in adolescents [22].

As consequences of the stress and exhaustion that adolescents feel throughout high school, the adoption of risk behaviors associated with the use of alcohol and other pharmacologically active substances is observed [23, 24].

Students' maladjustment to school life has been the subject of investigation in different countries. A study carried out in European countries showed that among Slovenian adolescents about 6.7% showed signs of burnout, the same being observed between 10% and 15% of Finnish adolescents. Elevated levels of burnout were observed in 21% of Swiss students, around 40% of French adolescents, and over 20% of Italian students [25].

How to help the adolescent

To effectively prevent school burnout, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of adolescents and the diversity of factors involved in their social context, which will allow for a more accurate identification of its causes. It is also important to note the presence of some personality traits such as narcissism and perfectionism that may be associated with school burnout [26, 27].

An important condition is the strengthening of social ties with family and friends that allow acceptance, understanding of the demands and support, allowing the teenager to express their feelings and share their anguish, with empathy and emotional intelligence, which will enable the strengthening of personality and resilience [28]. An

expanded social network involving teachers and colleagues in the school environment has also proven to be very useful to minimize the effects of school burnout [29, 20]. In addition, practicing sports [31, 32] and diversifying recreational activities in external environments that allow contact with other people contribute to reducing stress and improving quality of life.

Conflict of Interest

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